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ABSTRACT

This study examines women's experiences in pursuing careers in the arts or music. Data for the study was gathered through a survey mailed to a random sample of women graduates (n=73) from an internationally known school for music and art. While most survey questions were closed-ended and focused on demographic information, the most revealing information was found in participants' responses to open-ended questions which asked about specific events and college experiences that had encouraged or discouraged them from pursing careers in their majors. Grounded analysis of the data revealed connections between the messages women received and how such messages affected their careers. Messages were grouped according to the following characteristics: tone (positive or negative); whether the message applied only to women or could be equally applied to men; the sender and the sender's relationship to the woman. The study notes that the fields of music and the arts are almost devoid of cultural diversity and concludes that neither education nor society encourage women to freely develop their talents and creativity. It finds that in order for women to succeed in music and the arts, they must develop a strong self-esteem and the skills to contradict negative messages. (CH)

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# Careers in Music and the Arts: The Messages Women Receive

by Ann E. Fordon
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# Careers in Music and the Arts: The Messages Women Receive

Why do women who have exceptional training and talent in music and the arts decide—or decide not—to pursue a career in these fields? And, why do women who intend to pursue music and the arts change their minds and pursue other fields? Using data gathered from a survey mailed to a random sample of women graduates from Midwest Arts Academy[1], this study[2] analyzed the types of messages these women received about pursuing careers in music and the arts and speculates how these messages affected their career plans.

## Review of Literature

There has been a steady increase in research concerning women, education, and the pursuit of careers. While early educational research focused on the general development and experiences of college students[3] (usually meaning only men), more current research has given special attention to educational issues and experiences specific to women[4]. In the field of music, recent attention has focused on the incorporation of feminist theory in the music curriculum[5] and on studies

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[1]This is a pseudonym for an internationally-known boarding school for music and the arts, located in the Midwestern United States.

[2]The original data for this article was included in the author's M.Ed. thesis entitled "The Relationship Between Post-Secondary Education and Women's Pursuit of Careers" (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1992).

[3] F. B. Brawer, *New Perspectives on Personality Development in College Students* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1973); P. Madison, *Personality Development in College* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969); W. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970)

[4] M. F. Belenky, B. M. Clinchy, N. R. Goldberger and J. M. Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986); C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); D. C. Holland and M. A. Eisenhart, *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990)

[5] J. Bowers, "Feminist Scholarship and the Field of Musicology: II," *College Music Symposium* 29 (1989): 81-100; J. Bowers, "Feminist Scholarship and the Field of Musicology: II," *College Music Symposium* 30, no. 1(1990): 1-13; B. Coeyman,

concerning the status and experiences of female music faculty in colleges and universities[6]. The common theme throughout this research is that women's achievements and experiences are not often reflected in the higher education curriculum, there are fewer women than men serving as faculty members, and women consistently experience more obstacles than men while working toward their educational and career goals.

## Method

Participants for this study were 150 women who attended Midwest Arts Academy (MAA) as high school students for one or more academic years between 1976 and 1981. An initial list of all women (552) who attended during these years was compiled using the 1991 Alumni Directory. From this list, 150 women were randomly chosen and mailed a questionnaire. Of the 150 questionnaires mailed, 73 were returned and usable (49%), 19 were returned because of inaccurate forwarding addresses (13%), and 58 were unanswered (39%).

The construction of the questionnaire followed the guidelines presented by Dillman (1978). Although a majority of the survey questions were close-ended and focused on demographic information—such as ethnicity, age, and MAA area of study (referred to as "major"), levels of satisfaction with college/university professors, and levels of support from family and partners—the most revealing information regarding the women's experiences while pursuing their careers was found in their responses to the open-ended questions. These questions included:

-What specific events discouraged/encouraged you in pursuing your MAA major as a career?

-If you pursued your MAA major as a career, was there anything missing from your college experience that would have helped you?

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"Applications of Feminist Pedagogy to the College Music Major Curriculum: An Introduction to the Issues," *College Music Symposium* 36 (1996): 73-90

[6] L. Hetzel and K. Norton, "Women Choral Conductors at the Collegiate Level: Status and Perspectives," *College Music Symposium* 33/34 (1993/1994): 23-40; B. Payne, The Gender Gap: Women on Music Faculties in American Colleges and Universities 1993-1994, *College Music Symposium* 36 (1996): 91-102

-If you did not pursue your MAA major as a career, was there anything that could have been different in your college experiences that would have encouraged you?

-Is there anything else you would like to explain about your college experiences and pursuing your career?

The original analysis of this study used content analysis, which reinforced the findings of previous research stressing the importance of support for women pursuing non-traditional careers. However, this more recent analysis which uses grounded theory[7] transcends this original analysis and explains the connections between the messages women received and how they affected the pursuit of their careers. The following sections of this study will discuss the demographics and career paths of the women, describe and analyze the messages they received, and most importantly speculate how the messages they received could have influenced over half of the women who intended to pursue careers in music and the arts to change their plans and pursue other fields.

## The Women: Demographics

At the time of this study the mean age of these women was 30.6 years. Approximately 10 to 12 years had passed since they had attended MAA. Of the 73 women who participated in this study, 91% reported their ethnicity as Euro-American (with 10% identifying themselves as Jewish). The remaining 9% identified themselves as African America, Native American, Canadian Chinese, and Japanese American. Seventy-two percent of the women attended MAA for two or more years of high school, and reported music as their most common major (59%). Other majors represented in this study include dance (19%), visual arts and creative writing (both 11%), and theatre (8%). After studying at MAA, most women attended either a large state university (37%), a private university or college (33%), or a specialty school for the arts (23%).

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[7]A. Strauss and J. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1990)

## The Messages Received

The messages the women received about pursuing careers in music and the arts had several characteristics. The first characteristic was the **tone** of the message, that is whether it was positive (intended to encourage) or negative (intended to discourage). A second characteristic was the **recipient** of the message content. Some messages commented specifically on women pursuing careers in music or the arts, while other messages could have applied equally to women or men pursuing these fields. The **sender** of the message was a third characteristic. The women in this study identified senders as male, female, or general. The **proximity** of the sender to the women was a final characteristic. Some women reported that messages were sent by someone with whom they had a close relationship (such as a professor, private teacher, or family member), while others were from audience members or society.

## Career Paths

In relationship to their majors at MAA, the women's careers followed three paths. One group of women (34%, n=25) never intended to pursue their MAA majors as their careers. They regarded their interest in music and the arts more of a hobby and pursued other interests including medicine, business, and raising a family after attending MAA[8]. The remaining 66% of the women entered higher education with the intention of pursuing their MAA majors as careers in music and the arts. However, only 42% (n=21) of these women pursued their original plans, while 57% (n=28) later decided to pursue other fields. What were the differences between these two groups of women? And specifically, why did over 50% of these women who intended to pursue careers in music and the arts change their plans?

## "Encouraging Professors" and Other Positive Messages

For these highly talented and educated women, pursuing careers in music and the arts invited various messages from many individuals. To be expected, the women who succeeded in pursuing careers in music and the arts said they received positive messages regarding their endeavors. Usually these messages were verbally

communicated directly to the women by individuals with whom they had close relationships, such as professors, private instructors, or family members. For instance, one women described—in general terms—the positive messages she had received from her university professors and current mentor.

> Encouraging professors always helped....Currently I'm completing a Ph.D...and my advisor/mentor's confidence in me and help in starting my career does make a big difference.

Both men and women sent the women positive messages. One woman pursuing art described the positive messages she received from her male instructor.

> I...had a male instructor who greatly encouraged me to continue (and still does). He defended my work and character to several other male instructors.

And, a second woman indicated the importance of the positive messages she received from her female professors and family members.

> Female mentors in college and grad school have been essential—and I have deliberately sought out women profs. The support of my parents, and also my husband....have been very important too.

While the senders of positive messages were usually individuals with whom the women had close relationships, women pursuing careers in music performance often received positive messages from individuals with whom they had no relationship, such as audience members and music critics. One performer stated that winning concerto competitions, getting jobs in smaller orchestras, substituting with a major orchestra (and eventually being hired), and good newspaper reviews of her concerts encouraged her in her career. A second woman described her positive messages as the "positive reinforcement from teachers and friends" and "clapping at the end of performances."

### A "Lack of Encouragement" and Other Negative Messages

Although only those women who successfully pursued their careers in music and the arts said they received positive messages regarding their endeavors, both

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[8]Further discussion of the experiences of this group of women will not be included in

groups of women—including those who changed careers paths—received similar numbers of negative messages. However the characteristics of these negative messages—as described by both groups of women—differed. The specific characteristics include the sender, the proximity of the sender, and the content of the message. Generally, most of the negative messages received by women who successfully pursued their careers were sent by male professors who commented specifically on their inabilities as women to pursue a career in music and the arts. The quotes of two women who were pursuing careers in art illustrate this type of negative message.

> Despite my high grades in both academic and major area classes, I had several male instructors who criticized my work. One instructor (male) told me I should consider fashion design because of the colors I used in my paintings (and on the walls of my loft!) at the time.

> Some male teachers were not encouraging in that they possessed "MALE IDEAS" and therefore couldn't see into what it was to be a female painter or a female seeking an artistic career. This was especially clear when it was repeated to me many times that a woman HAD to chose between being either a mother or a painter, [and] that it was impossible to pursue both.

Another woman pursuing music recalled the negative messages she received from her male professors in music.

> I went to school...one year before [transferring] and had a lot of sexual harassment from the instructors. At [my transfer school I had] some—but not as much....I had a four year scholarship there, but I left after one year because of these things. These problems only occurred in the music areas [and] not from the academic instructors.

While most of the negative messages these women reported were sent by males, one woman did describe the messages she received from her female professors.

> [College] stunk. All they did was judge and discourage. I did not need to go to [college] after [high school]. I am now very successful....I remember in college

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this study.

> a voice teacher (who was supposedly "well" known) said I couldn't sing pop music. I have a #1 selling pop tape....College is a business. All my women teachers never wanted to see me succeed....Women teachers seem frustrated and always judge.

Finally, while a majority of the negative messages were received directly, the women also received negative messages indirectly from the experiences of others. One woman wrote: "Having my principal female mentor in college not receive tenure was very discouraging to me."

As stated previously, most of the women who pursued their careers received negative messages directly from male professors regarding their inability as women to pursue careers in music and the arts. The negative messages of the women whose career plans changed had different characteristics. Although most of the negative messages originated from someone to whom they were close, the messages these women received were indirect and generally discouraging and were not specifically directed toward their abilities as women. These negative messages are illustrated by two quotes from women who had planned to pursue music.

> The biggest thing that discouraged me from pursuing a career in music was my teacher's lack of encouragement for my talents. She was busy pursuing a solo career of her own and didn't seem to encourage any of her students except those who were already very advanced.

> [A] more devoted and encouraging teacher would have lead me to pursue my career in music. I think it's important that you feel the teacher is backing you up 100% since, with private lessons, the teacher/student relation becomes central to your four years in a conservatory. It's much like a student/advisor relationship in graduate school.

The women who changed their careers were also influenced by the negative messages they received directly from their parents, both financially and verbally.

> High competitiveness and the need for a great deal of money (for private university) discouraged me from pursuing the career I had intended....Also, my parents were not supportive in terms of the financial commitment, and this was discouraging to me....I think if I had found other people pursuing the same goals as I was to be more supportive of each other I might have been

encouraged to "stick it out." However, I suspect that the greater issue is that my parents were not supportive of my career. I think if one or both had been highly supportive this would have been a great encouragement.

I think, however, that if my parents had been more supportive of my dreams, I may have stuck with my original career plans to be a musician.

In addition to these generally negative messages, the women who changed careers were also influenced by negative messages which they believed implied that they did not have the talent or commitment necessary for careers in music or the arts. These messages were not sent by specific individuals, nor were they sent directly to the women; they were simply general impressions that the women felt which influenced their decisions not to pursue music and the arts. Interestingly, these negative messages coincided with other "positive" messages the women reported receiving about other possible career options. For instance, the comments of three women who had originally pursued careers in music illustrate how they became discouraged in music, but encouraged to pursue other fields.

It was discouraging because I was not specifically great at one area but very good in lots of areas. Because I was always up there, but never considered myself good enough to compete financially, I was discouraged from pursuing an arts-related career. On my own, through luck and experimentation, I have found a place for myself...where being good at lots of varied things is an advantage.

I was discouraged in pursuing my originally intended career as a musician, because I started quite late in life playing the instrument of my choice...and felt that I couldn't compete professionally with my peers....I cannot think of anything that could have been added to my college experience that would have encouraged me to pursue my music career.

I am much happier now that I didn't pursue a career in music. I was curious about too many other things....I am now working in the world of communications....and my paths happily cross with music (classical) from time to time, at which point I feel very pleased to know something about a field that others don't. Nothing is a waste.

In addition to negative messages regarding talent and commitment, the women also received messages concerning the financial instability of a career in music or the arts. Many of these messages focused on the lack of jobs and low salary, and convinced the women to pursue other fields. One woman in music wrote that:

> By the time that I was graduating from [college] I was not at all intrigued with the stage/dramatic aspect of pursuing an operatic career. I also did not care to "scrape by" being a poor singer. When I finished at [college], I had the prospect of a career in my family's business and traveling around the world regularly staring me in the face. That is what I chose over the prospect of being a struggling opera singer. To this day, I've rarely regretted it.

Another woman, who originally pursued a career in music, received negative messages concerning not only the commitment needed and possible financial instability, but also the politics that might accompany a career in music.

> The events that discouraged [me from] continuing in music were: (1) I had many different interests; (2) Music was such a 100% commitment that pursuing other interests was difficult; (3) I felt that if I was going to perform I couldn't do it with partial devotion; (4) I realized that music was a political game too and I was disillusioned that artistic endeavors could fall prey to this!; (5) Although I went to a university with an excellent music program, the environment was...[not] enriching....I was disappointed by that; (6) The teachers in college were not...devoted to students...and; (7) Music isn't very practical. I make a lot more money now than I probably ever would playing.

And, a woman who had originally pursued dance received messages about the lack of control and financial instability that might accompany her career.

> The prospect of not having a steady income as a dancer discouraged me from dancing for a career. The prospect that a physical therapy career would provide me with a steady income encouraged me to pursue this career. As a dancer, I was always in a subservient role. Now as a physical therapist, I am in control!

"...that Encouraged me to continue...": Why Women Pursued Music and the Arts

Why did over half of the women who intended to pursue a career in music and the arts change their plans and pursue other fields? Were these women influenced solely by the messages they received about pursuing their careers or did something more occur? The answers to these questions might be found in the differences in the messages the two groups of women received. Although both groups of women seemed to have received a fairly equal share of negative messages, there were differences in characteristics of the messages that the women who pursued their original careers received and of those of the women who changed their plans.

The first difference was the tone of the messages. As stated previously, the women who changed their plans did not report receiving any positive messages that would have encouraged them in their careers. This reported lack of positive messages could clearly be a weakness of the original survey used for this study. It is difficult to believe that a group of women as talented as these received no positive messages regarding a potential career in music or the arts. One would presume that they had received encouragement at some point in time in order to have ever considered a career in these fields. However, because they mentioned receiving no positive messages, this should be reported as one difference.

A second difference between the messages the two groups of women received was sender of the messages. The women who pursued careers in music and the arts reported that men sent a majority of their negative messages, while women who changed their plans did not specify who sent their messages.

A third difference was the content of the message. The women who pursued their careers reported that a majority of their negative messages focused on their inability as women to pursue a career in music or the arts due to their "femaleness" or the incompatibility of motherhood and a career. The women who changed their career plans reported receiving negative messages that commented not on their inability as women to pursue a career in music or the arts, but on the general negative aspects (such as financial instability) of the fields.

If, in addition to the differences in the messages, we consider the women's interpretations of these messages, it might be speculated that it was not the differences in the messages that influenced the women to pursue or not pursue their

original career plans but the women's abilities to deconstruct and interpret the negative messages they received. It seems that the women who pursued their original career plans had the knowledge and skills to be able to rationalize that the negative messages they received were not based on fact or their actual lack of talent, but in the sender's sexism or oppressive practices within higher education. This knowledge gave the women the power and ability to shift the blame of these negative messages from themselves to those who had sent them.

This is illustrated in the ways both groups of women responded to the negative comments they received. The quote of one woman who pursued a career in art shows her ability to interpret a negative message she received not as an indication of a lack of talent, but as a sexist and homophobic comment leading her to an increased commitment to succeed in her career.

> I considered this [negative comment] a bitter and sexist remark that Encouraged me to continue in my field. I believed then, as I do now, that being an openly gay woman with above average talent in a small male-dominated art school worked against me.

Likewise, the comment of another woman who pursued a career in art illustrates how she did not take her professors comments personally, and was able to identify a pattern of control in the student-teacher relationship of which she was not going to become a part.

> Some other male teachers were very encouraging in my pursuit of painting as a career, but always with their ideas attached....The way of looking at a student's work was through a sort of analytical critique. Often this analysis went beyond the artwork and into the personality of the student. I saw many students suffer from this and I had my share of probing into from male teachers who used their status to rule over young painters.

On the other hand, the women who changed their career plans did not—or were not able to—identify sexism in the negative messages they received. They described their negative comments in gender-neutral terms such as "high competitiveness," "financial commitment," "lack of jobs," and not having an "encouraging teacher." However, these were negative messages that all the women inevitably received at some point in time.

There were exceptions to these findings. In three instances, women from both groups interpreted their negative messages from an intermediary position where they were able to attribute their negative messages to causes outside of their control, but still changed their plans—or were thinking of doing so—due to their inability to place blame outside of themselves. One woman who originally pursued music easily recognized that one of her male teachers' negative messages had nothing to do with her ability, but her noncompliance with his sexual advances did. She also recognized that she had above average talent. Nonetheless, she eventually decided not to pursue a career in music.

> First instructor in my major—male—made sexual advances toward me. When I did not comply he told me, I had to relearn my technique since I had it all wrong. I switched teachers. (I was the only freshman who received an "A" on my jury...). My second instructor found out I was taking...ice skating lessons. He told me to leave music if I was interested in other subjects.

And, two other women who were currently engaged in their musical careers questioned their ability to have both a career and a family. Their words show how—although they had pursued their careers—their career plans might later change.

> As I got older, lots of other things besides music became important, such as my husband and children. I also have many other interests and my original ideal for music was either chamber music playing or a good orchestra job. But, that became less important as home life became more important.

> I've been very lucky to have the support of friends and family. My obstacles are all part of the larger economic picture: the academic job market has collapsed and I am having a lot of trouble finding employment despite having done well in school. I also feel that the difficulty in juggling career and children (I don't yet have any) is a factor in making me question the feasibility of my career goals. It is something I worry about a lot.

## Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study. One conclusion is that the fields of music and the arts are almost void of cultural diversity, if this sample of women is representative of those who pursue careers in these fields. In addition to

the negative messages the women in this study received, what other messages might a non-majority woman receive if she pursued a career in music or the arts, and what affect might those messages have on her career plans?

A second conclusion, which confirms other studies, is that the structure of education and society does not provide sufficient encouragement for women to freely develop their talents and creativity to their full potential. Other researchers such as Shaffer[9] have found that many gifted women reported they did not pursue their careers due to a lack of support from their families and educational institutions.

A third conclusion is that in order for women to succeed in the fields of music and the arts, which are still predominately male, they must have developed a strong self-esteem in order to deconstruct and contradict the negative messages they receive. Two women in this study alluded to their strong self-esteem. One woman stated: "I emerged from [MAA] with a theatrical ideal. That has helped me to face the social challenges that any artist—any true artist—faces head on." A second woman described her "inner desire" which developed during college.

> I had a great time in college and I knew what ever happened I would not change my career goals. I am currently a voice teacher...and a singer in a local band with the dreams and hopes (still) of signing that big record deal. I think the only thing that has kept me going is an incredible inner desire that had nothing to do with higher education.

The question of how we help young women develop the skills to contradict negative messages concerning their pursuit of careers in music and the arts still remains. Research[10] has found that young girls in elementary and secondary schools are frequently "silenced" by boys and unable to get positive attention from their teachers for their ideas. While the boys often command the teacher's attention by calling out, girls raise their hands and are quiet and demure in order to get positive approval from their teachers. These practices do not give girls the skills to

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[9]S. M. Morris, *Gifted Girls: The Disappearing Act. The Report Card #6* (Report No. EC 211 791, ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 301 944) (Washington, DC: Network, Inc., 1986)

persevere or pursue their ideas or talents, and often reinforces their belief that boys are smarter than they are since they receive a majority of the teacher's attention. Teachers must be conscious of how classroom dynamics affect the achievement of girls and give young girls the attention and skills to believe in themselves and their abilities, and teach young boys to be respectful of girls and their ideas.

In higher education the continuation of a non-sexist education is crucial. Female role models and courses in women's studies are incredibly important for women pursuing music and the arts, and should be thought of as much of a part of the music and the arts curriculum as private lessons. Without the personal growth and learning that occurs in these courses, all that is gained in women's fields of study could be lost.

The importance of women's studies courses to the women in this study is evident in the quote of one woman who pursued her career.

> It wasn't until I got to college—ironically a school that is rightly known as being male-centered—that I began to be exposed to women profs (even though there were very few), women's lit., and feminist theory. Not coincidentally, I blossomed in college....the importance of this for girl's (and boy's!!) education is too often overlooked.

A second woman who pursued music composition and musicology spoke of the importance of supportive individuals—including both female role models and encouraging male professors—during her education.

> I had no women mentors because there were no women on the faculties of the institution I attended for BM, MM, or PhD(!!). I have degrees in composition and musicology and women have not sufficiently penetrated those areas of music. Gratefully, I've studied with men that are supporters of women and have their total respect. This is important because I'm finishing a PhD and have two children and am married.

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[10]P. Orenstein, *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); M. Sadker and D. Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994)

Clearly, this study illustrates the importance of both an in-depth education for women pursuing careers music and the arts, as well as an education that provides them with the skills to rationalize and overlook the sexist, negative messages they might receive while pursuing their careers. It also illustrates the obligation of men and women in these fields to be conscious of the messages they send women pursuing music and the arts, and to be as supportive of women's career pursuits as they are of men's. If the fields of music and the arts are truly going to advance, we must not only provide the best education for women and men in the technical, creative, and appreciative aspects of these fields, but also an education that will foster strength within themselves, as well as respect and support of their colleagues.

## Coda

Although many women in this study did not pursue their MAA majors as their careers, neither this study or its conclusions are meant to criticize their abilities or decisions. There are many reasons to change careers, undoubtedly many which were not discussed in this study. However, the intent of this study was to describe the types of messages women receive while pursuing careers in music and the arts and propose one theory explaining how these messages might cause them to unwillingly change their careers.